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The Eschatology of the Thessalonian Correspondence – an Exercise in Pastoral Pedagogy and Constructive Theology

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INTRODUCTION

It is a truism that applies both to the New Testament in general and the Pauline writings in particular, namely that one is able to discern a tendency where initial imminent eschatological fervor is quickly muted and transformed into more institutionally sustainable expressions of future hope. Discussing dominical announcements of the coming kingdom, Jeremias emphasized the immediacy of Jesus' proclamation. "For the subject of all eschatological preaching is the imminent intervention of God, and not an intervention after thirty or forty years."¹ In his Jowett lectures of 1898-99, R.H. Charles postulated that Pauline eschatological thinking could be heuristically arranged in four stages. However, Charles noted that such an arrangement should not be represented as discrete or fully consistent phases of thought.

In the writings of this Apostle we find no single eschatological system. His ideas in this respect were in a state of development. He began with an expectation of the future that he had inherited largely from Judaism, but under the influence of great formative Christian conceptions he parted gradually from this and entered on a process of development, in the course of which the heterogeneous elements were for the most part silently dropped. We have marked out four stages in this development, but perfect consistency within these is not to be looked for. Even in the last the Apostle does not seem to have obtained finality, though he was ever working towards it.²

This process of modifying expectations of an imminent parousia as part of wider eschatological expectations probably represents the larger tendency in new religious movements to undergo what Max Weber famously described as the "routinization of the charisma".³ Weber noted that, "in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both."⁴ This may also reflect the way highly charged expectation of the immediate return of Jesus became refashioned in the service of the social and ethical needs of sustaining a more long term community of believers.

Therefore, such wider perspectives can be seen as pertinent to the way fervent eschatological expectation in the early Pauline writings are moderated and repackaged into more generalized and long-term hopes for an apocalyptic transformation on an indefinite future horizon. In part, scholars have discussed the problem of parousia delay for early expressions of Pauline theology. Admittedly not all have been convinced that Pauline theology reconceptualizes eschatological expectation, or even that parousia delay is a "problem" for Paul's thought. Thus, Schweitzer confidently

¹ J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (London: SCM, 1971), 131.

² R.H. Charles, *Eschatology: Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, Jowett Lectures 1898-99 (2nd ed; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1913), 437.

³ M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (German original *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1922), esp. 363-364.

⁴ Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 364.

declared that “from his first letter to his last Paul’s thought is always uniformly dominated by the expectation of the immediate return of Jesus.”⁵ The same perspective is re-articulated more recently and in slightly more qualified terms by Dunn. He states:

It can be claimed with confidence that the coming again of Christ was a firm part of Paul’s theology, maintained consistently from first to last in our written sources, Paul’s conviction that the parousia was imminent and becoming ever closer also seems to have remained remarkably untroubled by the progress of events and the passing of time.⁶

One can, therefore, observe a divide in scholarship between what is perhaps the mainstream view of a traceable development in Pauline eschatology, and a less well supported but nonetheless persistent view that the return of Christ remained central to Paul’s thinking throughout his writings. The former view argues that Paul’s eschatological thought underwent a process of development from the initial phase of imminent expectation of the parousia, which in response to the delay of Christ’s return was reformulated to emphasize the futurity of eschatological hope. By contrast, the latter perspective contends that an imminent parousia remains a governing epistemic category for Paul’s wider theological conceptions. Regardless of which of these views are correct, both alternatives see the Thessalonian correspondence as representing an early phase of Paul’s thinking, and consequently representing heightened commitment to the view that believers were to expect and faithfully await Christ’s soon return to earth to publicly display his Lordship. Therefore, this study has two objectives. First, it seeks to examine the shape of Pauline thought on the topic of eschatology at the earliest documented stage of the apostle’s teaching. Secondly, it attempts to contribute to wider debates concerning the level of consistency which one finds in Paul’s teaching, and to explore whether such consistency was a quality that Paul would have been seeking in the epistolary and verbal instruction that he provided to his fledgling communities. To anticipate the results of this study, it will be argued that Paul indeed had central theological commitments, but that his thinking developed in response to pastoral situations and that Paul may have understood this dialectical process as a pneumatologically led response to the needs of his new communities.

ESCHATOLOGY IN 1 THESSALONIANS

Paul’s first piece of correspondence to the Thessalonian believers is far more than a simple treatise on eschatological themes.⁷ It is rich in both pastoral and pedagogical ideas. These emphases recall the shared faith of the letter-writer and his audience, as well as providing further ethical and theological instruction. What is particularly striking is how the instruction and the recall of the community’s positive response to the gospel by the Thessalonians are both undergirded by a shared commitment to imminent eschatological expectations. Thus, while there are some obvious sections of eschatological teaching in the epistle, there are also many places in the letter where

⁵ A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (trans. W. Montgomery; 2nd ed; London A&C Black, 1953), 52.

⁶ J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 313.

⁷ Occasionally there have been scholars who have argued that Second Thessalonians should be placed chronologically before First Thessalonians. This viewpoint is summarized by Kümmel, but rejected since “the fact that I 2:17-3:10 could stand only in the first letter to the congregation speaks decisively against the hypothesis that I Thessalonians is the second letter to the congregation. The canonical order must, therefore, be the original one.” W.G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Eng. trans.; London: SCM, 1966), 186.

eschatological perspectives break through into other subject matter to provide a rationale or motivation for the perspective that Paul is articulating.

i. Waiting for the Son from Heaven (1 Thess 1:10)

The problems of determining the extent of the thanksgiving section(s) of the epistle are well-known,⁸ but in what all scholars agree is still part of such material, while praising the Thessalonians for steadfastness in the face of tribulation, Paul recalls the circumstances of their decision to turn (ἐπιστρέφω) to God (1 Thess 1:9). Then the description moves from past events to current attitudes. Yet here Paul couples such present orientations with a future perspective as he declares the purpose of turning to God was “to wait for his Son from the heavens” (1 Thess 1:10). This description betrays no obvious indication of the temporal gap between the act of “turning to God,” the duration of the period of waiting, and the timing of the expected parousia. This, however, should not be taken as indicating that Paul is not interested in issues of timing, since elsewhere in the epistle he reveals the expectation of the parousia during the lifetime of the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess 4:15, 17; 5:4).⁹ Rather, this brief initial reference to an eschatological perspective highlights both one of the key purposes of “turning to God”, while simultaneously announcing to readers of the epistle thematic concerns that will resurface at later points in the letter. Therefore, as Malherbe states, “Paul thus signals the eschatological interest that will occupy him throughout the letter (2:19; 3:13; 4:13-18; 5:1-11).”¹⁰ Therefore, this fleeting reference to the future hope of believers also envisages their current vocation as including the key task of waiting for God’s son.

The degree of similarity between the contents of the epistle and the verbal instruction that Paul gave to the Thessalonians whilst he was in their midst is unknown. However, in this instance, the instruction to “to wait for his Son from the heavens” is not rebutted, but is affirmed even in the face of some strident qualification (see 1 Thess 4:11; and more compellingly in 2 Thess 3:6-15). This strengthens the assumption that Paul had taught the Thessalonian believers that a key aspect of their present attitude was expectant waiting for the parousia. This apparently had led some to forsake the normal course of life, and in the process had caused social problems both within the group (2 Thess 3:14) as well as impacting on external relations (1 Thess 4:12). As Luckensmeyer notes, “accepting Paul’s *kērygma* leads to catastrophic social consequences in the present.”¹¹ Such a decision to disengage with the normal pattern of life is most easily understood as stemming from an over-interpretation of the consequences of Paul’s teaching concerning the imminence of the parousia. So even in this initial fleeting reference to the coming of the son, Paul affirms his continued understanding of the immediacy of that event. This understanding is shared by other commentators who see that such an act of waiting points to the temporal

⁸ For instance, see the variety of options described in K.P. Donfried and J. Beutler (eds.), *The Thessalonians Debate: Methodological Discord or Methodological Synthesis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. comments in the preface, the various analyses provided in the essays in Part 1, and the opening essay in Part 2.

⁹ G.L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Leicester: Eerdmans/Apollos, 2002), 109.

¹⁰ A.J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 121.

¹¹ D. Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, NTOA 71 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 114.

proximity of the expected person.¹² Yet, as later comments imply, Paul's teaching had social implications, which he attempted to correct. It may be the case that through reflecting on his pedagogical strategy and the behaviours it produced, Paul began to move in the direction of reformulating the way he articulated his teaching on the parousia. Here, what Mitchell has argued concerning Paul's instructional strategy in relation to Corinthian believers appears to also hold for the Thessalonians. Mitchell suggests that Paul operated with an "agonistic paradigm of interpretation," whereby meaning was negotiated between Paul and the recipients of his teaching through a series of interactions (such as epistles).¹³ This process of negotiated clarification of meaning appears to operate between Paul and the Thessalonians in relation to the apostle's teaching surrounding the parousia and its implications for contemporary ethics with a community that is called to live with the core expectation of the return of God's son.

ii. The Thessalonians as Paul's Crown at the Parousia (1 Thess 2:19)

The next reference to the coming of Jesus is even more fleeting than the first, and conveys little direct description of the event or its timing. In response to his own rhetorical question "who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?" Paul supplies the answer, ἡ οὐχὶ καὶ ὑμεῖς – ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ παρουσίᾳ (1 Thess 2:19). For Charles this verse provided clear evidence that Paul "expects the parousia in his own lifetime (1 Thess. ii. 19)."¹⁴ However, it is not certain that this statement in itself necessitates this interpretation, since there are few temporal markers provided.¹⁵ Instead, in this context Paul responds to the circumstance of his somewhat embarrassing departure from Thessalonica, not with explanation or promise of a return visit, but justifying his absence on the basis of eschatological presence when he and the Thessalonians are reunited in Christ's presence. Fee puts a positive perspective on Paul's failed attempts to visit the recently established community. He states that Paul's "interest is personal and relational, so he explains what had compelled him to try to do so on several occasions. It had to do with the Thessalonians' eschatological future."¹⁶ On the surface this is correct, Paul declares that what motivated him to return was the fact that the Thessalonians were precious to him, because they would be his crowning achievement before Jesus at his parousia. Yet one should not overlook the discomfort that the hasty departure from the city caused Paul. He speaks in glowing terms of his own εἰσοδος when he arrived (1 Thess 2:1), but even the potentially sanitized version of the hasty nocturnal departure from Thessalonica described in Acts (17:10) leaves the impression that the Thessalonians were left to fend for themselves in the face of much opposition (1 Thess 1:6). Thus the abiding eschatological presence of the Lord is used as a strategic response to Paul's ongoing absence from his converts.

¹² J.E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 88; E. Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1972), 83.

¹³ M.M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 106.

¹⁴ Charles, *Eschatology: Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, 441.

¹⁵ As Richard illustrates, even the decision of determining whether the Thessalonians are Paul's hope, joy and crown in the present or the future is not entirely certain. Richard is correct that the most likely option is to read this a future reference since it is link to the coming of Jesus. E.J. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Sacra Pagina 11 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995), 132-134.

¹⁶ G.D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010), 107-108.

It is perhaps for this reason that temporal concerns do not occupy Paul's train of thought at this juncture. It is the quality of the eschatological presence that is central to the narrative here. Yet as a counterpoint to the joy of eschatological presence that awaits Paul and his fellow believers, the concept of coming judgment is the negative consequence for those who do wait for the son (1 Thess 1:10) or who hinder Paul's mission to Gentiles (1 Thess 2:16). Paul envisages two possible "futures," one that lies before the Thessalonians because of their reception of God's word and another that is the fate of those that oppose Paul's message. The aorist verb ἔφθασεν has been seen by some as precluding a future referent to ἡ ὀργὴ εἰς τέλος (1 Thess 2:16).¹⁷ However, Luckensmeyer questions the need to read ἔφθασεν as being focused on a past event, primarily because "Paul's reference to *orgē* is predominantly to the future."¹⁸ In addition, drawing on notions of the verbal aspect of the aorist, and in comparison with examples such as Rom 8:30, Mk 11:24 and Rev 10:7, the use of ἔφθασεν is seen as a proleptic future-time aorist.¹⁹ So being in the presence of the Lord at the parousia (1 Thess 2:19) and the wrath (1 Thess 2:16) form a matched pair of opposed binary eschatological fates. Yet in these preliminary descriptions of eschatological events no explicit time-scale is announced. With the fuller descriptions of eschatological events provided later in the epistle, more clarity can be gained in understanding Paul's perspectives on the parousia.

iii. The Fate of those who have Died before the Parousia (1 Thess 4:13-18)

The reason Paul raises the topic concerning the fate of believers who have died prior to the parousia at this point in the letter is not entirely obvious. It appears in material where Paul is dealing with a short series of largely unrelated topics that effect or concern inner community relations and cohesion, but also may have implications for wider societal perceptions.²⁰ There is debate as to whether the teaching that Paul provides in this section is new instruction for the Thessalonians, or whether although "the Thessalonians had received instruction from Paul regarding the resurrection of the dead, they had not fully appreciated it."²¹

Paul opens this section with the semi-formulaic expression οὐ θέλομεν δὲ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί (1 Thess 4:13). Similar expressions are found on five other times in the Pauline corpus, Rom 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor 1:8. In relation to Rom 1:13 where Paul reveals his previous plans to have visited the believers in Rome, Jewett notes that such disclosure formulae appear as an element in non-biblical letters.²² In relation to Pauline usage, Fitzmyer states that "[i]t introduces something that he considers important and wishes to make explicit."²³ In the case of Rom 1:13 it appears that Paul discloses intended travel plans, of which those in Rome had no

¹⁷ For instance see R. Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 38.

¹⁸ Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 154.

¹⁹ Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 156.

²⁰ In 1 Thess 4:3-8 Paul provides an injunction against sexual immorality, although the precise issue at point is not entirely clear. Next, there is a general exhortation to continue the recognized practice of inner-communal love, although this is likely a corrective to a breakdown in the practice of a normative lifestyle that has arisen because of heightened eschatological fervor (1 Thess 4:9-12). Finally Paul addresses the issue of the fate of Thessalonian believers who have died prior to the parousia (1 Thess 4:13-18).

²¹ See C.A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1990), 166; and I.H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCBC (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1983), 120-122.

²² R. Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 126.

²³ J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 249.

previous awareness. So this is not a recollection of previously known information, but disclosure of matters that were not known beforehand. In Rom 11:25 the formula is used not to introduce personal information, but to reveal a theological perspective, or in Pauline terms a “mystery”. This example is particularly apposite since it involves the disclosure of information that has an apocalyptic focus. Here Paul sees himself communicating “secret knowledge about a decision hidden in God from of old, but now revealed in and through Jesus Christ for the salvation of all humanity; it is an unfolding manifestation of God’s eschatological activity.”²⁴ It may be considered unsurprising that when Paul wishes those in Rome “not to be ignorant,” that he is communicating previously undisclosed truths, since he had not visited the city at the time of writing the epistle. This is a marked difference to the circumstances of the Thessalonian correspondence, which is sent after the original visit.

The other three examples do, however, represent examples where Paul is writing to a community he has established and instructed over a lengthy period. The two examples in 1 Cor 10:1 and 12:1 are not only similar structurally, but rhetorically function in a similar fashion. For this reason they can be treated together. In relation to 1 Cor 10:1 most commentators agree that the Corinthians (at least collectively) would have been aware of the story of “the cloud” from the Jewish scriptures. Rather, as Conzelmann observes, “[t]he new element which Paul has to offer is the *interpretation*.”²⁵ Similarly, the teaching on spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1ff.) is not an entirely new topic for the Corinthians, but Paul provides a new interpretative slant or corrective.²⁶ The final example, 2 Cor 1:8, in the same manner as Rom 1:8, discloses information about Paul’s personal circumstances which was previously unknown to the recipients of the letter. This survey of the use of the expression confirms Collins’ suggestion. He states,

Paul uses two variants of the classic disclosure formula, one with the double negative ... the other in a positive form. He uses the positive form when he supposes that the information is already known to his addressees (11:2; cf. 12:3; 15:1; Gal 1:11). The form with the double negative is used to impart new information (12:1; Rom 1:13; 11:25; 2 Cor 1:8).²⁷

This leads to the supposition that in 1 Thess 4:13, Paul is indeed disclosing new information (or at the least providing a more complete treatment of his earlier eschatological teaching). The implication is that the Thessalonians have raised a topic of concern which was thrown-up by the death of at least one community member. Paul’s initial eschatological teaching on the topic while in Thessalonica therefore appears not to have grappled with the issue of believers who die before the parousia. This may have been due to the fact that because of his hasty departure Paul had insufficient time to relate the complexity of his eschatological teaching, or perhaps more likely, given his belief in the imminence of the parousia he may not have previously contemplated this possibility prior to the Thessalonians raising the question.²⁸

Whether a reminder, or fresh information (the latter being more likely), Paul demonstrates a pastoral sensitivity in the way he responds to the concern of the Thessalonians. He seeks to obviate a sense of grief surrounding the ultimate fate of

²⁴ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 620.

²⁵ H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 165.

²⁶ See G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 576.

²⁷ R.F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina 7 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 368.

²⁸ For an opposite view see Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 262.

deceased believers. Paul's explanation is in response to what Dunn recognizes as the fear on the part of the Thessalonian believers "that those who had died would therefore be disadvantaged or miss out on the parousia (1 Thess 4:15)."²⁹ While the passage contains a number of exegetical obscurities, its broad meaning is clear. Paul reaffirms that believers are different from the rest of humanity in that they have eternal hope. Death is not a bar to such hope, for Jesus' death and resurrection is paradigmatic for the resurrection of any believers who have died prior to the parousia, and in fact, according to Paul, those who have died will precede the living in joining the events of the parousia prior to those who are alive (1 Thess 4:15). In this way Paul reverses the conclusions that may have been reached by the Thessalonians, and states that contrary to their concern the dead are not disadvantaged, but in fact turn out to be privileged.³⁰

Paul's assurance is predicated on two grounds, first acceptance of Jesus' resurrection as defeat of death (1 Thess 4:14), and secondly on "a word of the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15). The latter is problematic, and has occasioned much debate concerning the precise nature of any underlying reference.³¹ Pahl suggests that the phrase "a word of the Lord" does not denote a specific tradition, but that Paul is using the expression in an encompassing manner to refer to his proclamation of the gospel.³² By contrast, Garrow detects specifically a reference to *Didache* 16. However, Garrow's argument raises questions of the direction of dependence between the similar eschatological statements in 1 Thess 4:15-17 and *Didache* 16. Notwithstanding this specific exegetical crux, the general meaning of Paul's assurance to the Thessalonians remains clear. Therefore, in this earliest extant teaching on the parousia in a Christian source, the assurance concerning the participation of the dead in the events of Christ's second coming is also coupled with the theological basis of this confidence, as well as conveying an embryonic outline of a sequence of eschatological events.

First, Paul's expression "we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord" (1 Thess 4:15), is perhaps the clearest indication in the Pauline corpus that, at least at this stage of his life, Paul expected the parousia to occur within his own lifetime. At the parousia, according to Paul, God will cause deceased believers to be revived, although the precise actions of "God" and the "Lord" – which is presumably a reference to the risen Jesus throughout this passage,³³ are not entirely clear. Three related apocalyptic phenomena – the Lord descending with a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God – act as summoning calls to the dead. Here Paul stays focused on the content of the Thessalonians' concern, by describing the process by which the faithful dead will be roused from their slumber. At this point the revived dead join the Lord in his aerial triumphal procession, and then they are accompanied by those believers who will be alive at the parousia. From this point onward, according to the Pauline description, believers who will be either alive or dead at the Lord's coming, share the same eternal destiny, since they remain ever with him in what appears to be an ongoing existence in the realm of the clouds (1 Thess

²⁹ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 299.

³⁰ Green suggests that Paul offers such a strong inversion to the pattern envisaged by the Thessalonians to counter their supposition that "only the living would have the honour of going out to meet the Lord in his royal and triumphal parousia." Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 223.

³¹ Most recently see M.W. Pahl, *Discerning the 'Word of the Lord': The 'Word of the Lord' in 1 Thessalonians 4:15*, LNTS 389 (London: T&T Clark, 2009); and A.J.P. Garrow, "The Eschatological Tradition behind 1 Thessalonians: *Didache* 16", *JSNT* 32.2 (2009), 191-215.

³² Pahl, *Discerning the 'Word of the Lord'*, 156-171.

³³ As Fee states, "Paul always and consistently uses 'the Lord' (*kyrios*) to refer to Christ just as 'God' (*theos*) always refers to the Father." Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 173.

4:17). Paul completes his *inclusio* by returning to the pastoral concerns that commenced this section (1 Thess 4:13). He encourages the Thessalonian believers to “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:18).

Some unresolved problems, which may be irresolvable, remain. First, what state do the dead find themselves in between their death and the parousia? Wanamaker suggests that “[a]lthough Paul uses κοιμᾶσθαι in relation to those who die prior to the resurrection in v. 13 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20ff.; Dan 12:2 served as a precedent for connecting the sleep of death with the resurrection), it is precarious to make any deductions regarding Paul’s understanding of an intermediate state between physical life and resurrection.”³⁴ More emphatically, Green declares,

Some have erroneously concluded that this epithet for the dead implies that the soul sleeps after death, but the NT teaching clearly points to a conscious existence during the intermediate state (Luke 16.19-31; 23.39-43; Acts 7.55-60; 2 Cor 5.6-10; Phil. 1.20-24; Rev. 6.9-11).³⁵

Unless one starts with the assumption that the various New Testament authors had a unified perspective on the intermediate state (rather than establishing it to be the case) then the only potentially relevant references are the two from the Pauline corpus, 2 Cor 5:6-10 and Phil 1:20-24. The former provides little that is relevant for determining the issue. The passage from Phil 1:20-24 is perhaps more relevant, since Paul implies that “departing” this life will bring him into the presence of Christ (Phil 1:23). However, even here Paul does not state that this happens instantly without any delay, although, admittedly, that might be the most likely reading of this text. Yet, even within the Pauline corpus it may be a mistake to expect total consistency, especially when Paul’s comments are so tentative and opaque. At this point Bockmuehl’s observations concerning the limitations of the Pauline text are extremely helpful. In relation to Phil 1:23 in response to the question “does Paul assume ... that the departed Christians now exist in an intermediate state between death and resurrection?,” he states,

The truth is, however, that Paul does not directly address himself to these kinds of questions, which in fact to some extent miss the point of this passage altogether. Paul is not interested in the metaphysics of some twilight world between death and resurrection. Instead, it is clear for him that the one supreme good in life and death is to be in Christ and with Christ, to be part of his triumphal defeat of evil, sin and death in all its forms.³⁶

While Bockmuehl is correct to draw attention to the partial nature of the data in Phil 1:23, in 1 Thess 4:15-16 the way the apocalyptic signs are narrated with the triad of shout, voice and trumpet, one is left with the impression that these auditory phenomena are designed to wake sleepers. Given an expectation of an imminent parousia, a short period of slumber in the post-mortem state does not appear to concern Paul. Perhaps as his expectation of the immediacy of the return of the Lord lessened, he again nuanced his understanding of the post-mortem state to allow for some meaningful existence in an interim state, although this remains an undeveloped aspect of Paul’s thinking. However, Paul’s central purpose is not to clarify the existential quality of the intermediate state, but to emphasize that the fidelity of dead believers is not undone by death. In this vein, Richard outlines where Paul places his emphasis. “Paul by the use of the expression ‘the dead in Christ’, focuses not on some intermediate Christ-like existence between death and resurrection but on the fact that

³⁴ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 167.

³⁵ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 223.

³⁶ M. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1998), 93.

those who have died as faithfully followers of Jesus before his return can expect to be raised from the dead.”³⁷

iv. Times and Epochs (1 Thess 5:1-11)

This section is closely linked with the discussion concerning believers who have died, both through the continued discussion of eschatological themes and more directly through explicit restatement of Paul’s pastoral assurance that the dead have a part in the future life: “whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him” (1 Thess 5:11). However the central concern is not the fate of the faithful deceased, but an exhortation to preparedness for the coming day of the Lord. The sense of urgency that pervades these verses is noted by Bruce who observes, “the Parousia may be expected in the lifetime of the readers, who are urged to be alert and ready for it when it comes.”³⁸ However, this unit comprises more than a declaration of urgency based on the assumption of the nearness of the day of the Lord. After affirming the unexpected coming of that time, Paul takes the future event as the basis of the moral imperative that he issues in 1 Thess 5:4-8. The section is then completed with theological perspectives and the ecclesiological concern to continue in mutual encouragement (1 Thess 5:9-11).³⁹

For Charles, the declaration given by Paul that in regard to future events the Thessalonians need no instruction is seen as illustrating “[w]ith what vividness and emphasis the Apostle must have preached the impending advent of Christ.”⁴⁰ While Paul taught that the day of the Lord was to be welcomed by believers since it heralded the time when they would always be with Christ (1 Thess 4:14; 5:10), it is also stated that it will bring negative consequences for those who had not received the gospel. In this passage Paul spells out those negative consequences most clearly, but they have been alluded to in other parts of the epistle (“the wrath to come,” 1 Thess 1:10; cf. 2:16). For those outside the community of believers, Paul states that the day of the Lord will be the time when “destruction will come upon them” (1 Thess 5:3), and that they will be “overtaken” by the events (1 Thess 5:4). By contrast, for believers Paul can state that ‘God has not destined us for wrath’ (1 Thess 5:9). While the judgment motif is certainly present in Paul’s apocalyptic teaching, the fact that relatively little space is devoted to this topic in 1 Thessalonians suggests it was a minor theme. Hence, it may be inferred that Paul motivated his audience by the promise of the eschatological blessing of being with Christ, rather than haranguing them with the threat of apocalyptic punishment and wrath. Notwithstanding this emphasis, a surprising aspect of the passage, as Fee notes, is that “the perspective has to do with the day of the Lord in relationship to unbelievers rather than believers.”⁴¹ While the day of the Lord has negative consequences for unbelievers, its unexpected nature is employed by Paul as an admonition to motivate believers to engage in morally appropriate behaviours. As such, it appears, contrary to certain commentators, that Paul is not simply seeking “to quiet their excitement, almost bordering on fanaticism,”⁴² but rather to harness belief in the imminent parousia to bring about morally appropriate life in the interim period. Therefore, according to Paul, certainty

³⁷ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 243.

³⁸ F.F. Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians*, WBC 45 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1982), 108.

³⁹ For a similar understanding of the structure of this unit see B. Rigaux, “Tradition et rédaction dans 1 Th v.1-10”, *NTS* 21 (1974-75), 318-340.

⁴⁰ Charles, *Eschatology: Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, 442.

⁴¹ Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 185.

⁴² Charles, *Eschatology: Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, 442.

about the immediacy of the day of the Lord should lead to stability and a right ordering of one's life. Thus, while dissolute lives are indicative that those of the "darkness" are destined for wrath, morally ordered and stable lives should be the indicators that believers are indeed "sons of light" (1 Thess 5:5) destined 'for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thess 5:10). The outcome of this understanding should lead, based upon Paul's perspectives, to mutual concern and the safeguarding of the community's ethical stance (1 Thess 5:11).

Luckensmeyer sees significant difference between the use of eschatological motifs in 1 Thess 4:13-18 and 5:1-11, due to the introduction of the negative element of judgment.⁴³ However, he sees that Paul refocuses teaching on the day of the Lord in such a way to emphasize social cohesion within the group. He notes that with 1 Thess 5:1-11, "Paul does not overtly address the Thessalonians' social disintegration by linking it to current or recently passed experiences. Rather, the pattern of exhortation is more indirect. Social disintegration is now understood symbolically, in terms of the day of the Lord."⁴⁴ Therefore, the rhetoric of eschatological teaching is employed by Paul to emphasize the necessity of a sober lifestyle (1 Thess 5:6) and that soteriological transformation is inaugurated in the present age (1 Thess 5:9-10). Luckensmeyer suggests that Paul, "chose this eschatological motif [of the day of the Lord] precisely because of its application to his pattern of exhortation,"⁴⁵ which employs positive and negative elements of deliverance and judgment. Although, Luckensmeyer may be correct that Paul is not responding to a direct question from the Thessalonians (unlike 1 Thess 4:13-18) about the day of the Lord, it may be incorrect to say that Paul "chose" this topic. In many ways it was chosen for him by the apparently incorrect corollaries that some Thessalonian believers extracted from Paul's proclamation of the imminence of the parousia. Consequently, Paul is left with two main options, either to jettison his eschatological teaching, or to find a way of redeploying it so it becomes a hermeneutical tool that supports his call for morally stable and quietistic lives. It is this later approach that Paul adopts, and in the process he produces a more nuanced eschatology that provides paraenetic instruction about how to conduct life in the interim period. Thus, the misunderstanding of Paul's teaching by certain members of the Thessalonian group is employed by Paul to refocus his teaching and correct misapprehensions. He does not resile from previous statements, but through a dialectic process a clear formulation of Pauline teaching concerning the parousia emerges.

ESCHATOLOGY IN 2 THESSALONIANS

The Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians remains a contested issue. The existence of letters written in Paul's name by others is not just a modern hypothesis, but appears to be a phenomenon that is acknowledged in 2 Thessalonians. The authors of this epistle, self-named as Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, state that they seek to prevent the believers in Thessalonica from being shaken in mind by spirit, word, 'or a letter as if it is from us' (2 Thess 2:2). If the letter is pseudonymous, then this is an extremely subtle and skilful strategy or even some kind of "double bluff," which draws attention to the existence of letters written in Paul's name to avert suspicion that this letter is such a pseudonymous composition. Richard sees the phrase "as if from us," ὥς δι' ἡμῶν, just

⁴³ Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 275-276.

⁴⁴ Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 276.

⁴⁵ Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 315.

referring to the term “letter,” and not to the reference to “spirit,” or “word”. On this basis he argues that this reference denotes an epistle that, “is a letter which the apocalyptic group has written in Paul’s name, a letter which defends their view that ‘the Lord’s day has come.’”⁴⁶ Despite continued doubts in a few quarters concerning the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, the arguments against Pauline authorship do not seem as compelling as those mounted against a number of other epistles in Pauline corpus. Kümmel expressed the following sentiments in favour of the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians:

II Thessalonians remains best understood if Paul wrote II a few weeks after I, when I was still fresh in his memory. Thus, on the one hand, the apocalyptic teaching becomes understandable, which now, as an elaboration of Paul’s original missionary preaching, shows the other side of the question ... The somewhat changed situation also makes understandable the amplification of those points of view which already were treated in I, such as the duty of suffering, the threat of judgment against persecutors of the church, and the reproof of the slothful and fanatics. If there remain some details in II (and even in I) which are not as clear to us as we would like for them to be, we still have no cause to doubt the authenticity of II, for this lack of clarity is the consequence of II’s being a real letter.⁴⁷

While the specificity of seeing this letter written a few weeks after the former may be over-confident, the remaining comments do provide a strong case for maintaining the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. This discussion will proceed with the assumption that 2 Thessalonians is a genuine letter of Paul, and thus reflects development in the apostle’s eschatological thought. Even if this assumption were found to be incorrect, this would not invalidate the observations that follow. It would simply show that eschatological thinking in early Pauline circles underwent a degree of modification.

However, perhaps the more important point to note is the possibility that another letter existed, which appears to have been in circulation under Paul’s name, which had as its purpose the aim of convincing recipients that ‘the day of the Lord has come’ (2 Thess 2:2). This, along with much else in 2 Thessalonians, signals that the letter’s primary concern was to address certain eschatological misconceptions that had produced a lack of responsible living, and also fractured the social cohesion of the community.

i. Apocalyptic Judgment (2 Thess 1:6-10)

After lauding the Thessalonians for the increase in their faith and mutual love in the face of suffering, which shows they will be found worthy of the kingdom at the time of God’s judgment (2 Thess 2:3-5),⁴⁸ Paul moves on to consider the fate of those causing affliction for the Thessalonian believers. Although 1 Thessalonians touched upon the subject of the “coming wrath,” there was no extended treatment of this

⁴⁶ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 325. Richard ultimately sees 2 Thessalonians as pseudonymous. He argues that a group opposed to the apocalypticists’ group decides to “fight fire with fire”. They respond to one false letter, with another “by carefully imitating 1 Thessalonians, by appealing repeatedly to apostolic tradition, or by insisting that the greeting is in Paul’s own handwriting (3:17)” (p. 29).

⁴⁷ Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 191.

⁴⁸ The precise meaning of 2 Thess 1.5 is difficult to determine. In part, this is due to the elliptical construction that is employed. Notwithstanding this, the basic meaning is clear. As Green states, “However the construction is understood, the *evidence* of this just *judgment* is found in the previous verse. The *evidence* of just *judgment* may be ‘the perseverance and faith’ of the Thessalonians, or it may be the sufferings themselves.” Green comes to the conclusion that Paul is presenting a theology of suffering. Namely, that the sufferings themselves constitute the evidence which reveals that God’s judgments are just. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 284.

theme in the first letter. Here, however, there is a fuller exposition of the judgment that will befall those afflicting the fledging community of believers in Thessalonica.

In what follows, Paul announces the two aspects of God's judgment (2 Thess 1:6-10), which will take place at the parousia. For those who torment believers, it is declared to be an act of justice for God "to repay those who afflict you with affliction" ἀνταποδοῦναι τοῖς θλίβουσιν ὑμᾶς θλίψιν (2 Thess 1:6). The emphasis in this verse falls upon the just actions of God to vindicate faithful sufferers, rather than upon retribution itself. As Malherbe states, it "is this practical, pastoral purpose that drives Paul's language, not interest in divine retribution as part of theodicy."⁴⁹ Once again, it appears that Paul develops a theologically appropriate response to a concrete situation facing one of his newly formed communities. Without doubt, resources for such a theology are to be found in Jewish reflections on God's judgment that would have been known to Paul. However, Paul does not appear to have a totally formed view of eschatological judgment. Instead he supplements his core beliefs, enunciated in the previous letter, with modifications that address the pressing pastoral needs of the Thessalonians. Paul intermingles two related schemas, one for unbelieving tormentors, the other for afflicted believers. The first consists of the promise to repay afflictions (2 Thess 1:6), this will take place when "the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire" (2 Thess 1:7), the angels deal out retribution to those who neither know God nor obey his gospel (2 Thess 1:8), and the punishment is to spend eternity "away from the presence of the Lord" (2 Thess 1:9).

It should be noted that while the Lord and his angels come "in flaming fire" (2 Thess 1:7), the "fire" is not portrayed as an instrument of torture for unbelievers. Instead the flaming fire is part of the theophanic language that depicts the parousia of the Lord Jesus. The history of interpretation of this phrase has proved both problematic and unhelpful. First, the later added versification, which places the expression ἐν πυρὶ φλογός at the start of v. 8, has often resulted in translators reading it as an instrument of judgment.⁵⁰ Furthermore, there is a textual variant that results in the two following readings:

ἐν πυρὶ φλογός (= "in a fire of flame")

α A 0111vid. 0278. 33. 1739. 1881. Maj (b) d
m sy^{hmg}, Ambst

ἐν φλογὶ πυρός (= "in a flame of fire")

B D F G Ψ 1505. 2464 pc lat st co; Ir^{lat} Tert

The second reading may have been introduced into the manuscript tradition to produce a greater conformity with the theophanic appearance of the angel of the Lord in the burning bush, ὥφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐν φλογὶ πυρός (LXX Ex 3:2).⁵¹ The second reading also produces greater agreement with LXX Isa 66:14, which announces that "the Lord as fire will come, and as a storm his chariots, to recompense with wrath, punishment and repudiation in flame of fire (ἐν φλογὶ πυρός)". This does not mean that the reading ἐν πυρὶ φλογός is not theophanic. Rather, later scribes recognized Paul's allusion to either Ex 3:2 or Isa 66:15 and increased the level of verbal correspondence with one or other of these two theophanic passages.⁵²

⁴⁹ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 397.

⁵⁰ This tendency is perhaps also strongly influenced by the rendering given by the Authorized Version where the phrase is linked with the following participle, i.e. "in flaming fire taking vengeance".

⁵¹ There is also variation in the texts of the LXX between the readings ἐν πυρὶ φλογός (Codex B) and ἐν φλογὶ πυρός (Codex A, *rell*).

⁵² Contrary to the reading adopted by NA27, Fee takes the reading ἐν φλογὶ πυρός to be original since he believes that later scribes were responsible for confirming the text to the less well-known B text of Ex 3.2. This does not appear as likely as the scenario that Paul has imperfectly remembered the text of either Ex 3.2 or Isa 66.15 (LXX), or that he knew the less well known B text of Ex 3.2 (LXX) and that

Therefore, both on grammatical grounds and on the basis of theophanic allusions, Paul speaks of the Lord Jesus coming in “a fire of flame,” to bring appropriate judgment on those who do not receive the gospel.

The second schema that Paul describes is that for the afflicted believers. The starting point is the same, namely that God brings righteous judgment (2 Thess 1:5), which takes place when Jesus arrives with his mighty angels (2 Thess 1:7). However the consequence of this parousia is different for believers. At that time he will be glorified and seen to be marvellous by believers (2 Thess 1:10). For Paul, the Thessalonian believers have an apocalyptic identity that is inextricably linked to the coming of the Lord Jesus. This is recognized by Wanamaker, who notes that the 2 Thess 1:10 “emphasizes the identification of the Christian community with the coming Lord on the day of judgment and salvation.”⁵³ Pastoral considerations modify the way Paul presents his eschatological teachings for a suffering community. He consoles them with the assurance of God’s future just judgments. The emphasis falls on the theophanic revelation of Jesus at his coming, and the explanation that the corporate identity of believers is disclosed through the parousia. As a corollary, Paul is forced to provide fuller explanation of the fate of those who torment the Thessalonian believers. This, however, is not his major concern, and in a restrained manner he describes their punishment simply in terms of absence from the presence of the Lord (2 Thess 1:9).⁵⁴

ii. The Day of the Lord (2 Thess 2:1-2)

Treating the first two verses separately from the remainder of this eschatological discussion (vv. 3-12) is partially a choice of convenience, but it also serves to highlight Paul’s central premise on which the following argument is predicated, at least loosely.⁵⁵ Paul uses the ἐρωτῶμεν δέ construction that is a feature of the previous letter to the Thessalonians (see 1 Thess 4:1; 5:12; cf. Phil 4:3), to broach this new subject. The issue concerns two related aspects of the believers’ future hope, ὑπὲρ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ’ αὐτόν (2 Thess 2:1). Once again the theme of the parousia comes to the fore. Paul asserts that the Thessalonians are in danger of being “shaken” by the claim that the “day of the Lord has come” (2 Thess 2:2). The verb used in this clause, ἐνέστηκεν, is perfect in form and should be given that force, primarily because of its stative verbal aspect. That is, “it views the action of the verb as reflecting a given (often complex) state of affairs.”⁵⁶ Bruce notes both that it “cannot be seriously disputed that ‘is present’ is the natural sense of ἐνέστηκεν,” and despite this he observes “there remains considerable support for the sense of imminence ... rather than actual presence.”⁵⁷ The tendency to resist the reading that is both clear and natural appears to stem from the assumption that the Thessalonians could not actually have believed that

a later scribe introduced the better known reading. See G.D. Fee, *Pauline Theology: An Exegetical Theological Study* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 58 n. 83.

⁵³ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 230.

⁵⁴ Fee observes thus restrained interest in the fate of unbelievers. He states that for Paul “eternal glory has to do with being in the presence of the Father and the risen Lord. The eternal judgment of the wicked is the absolute loss of such glory. ... Paul’s emphasis is on their being shut out from God’s presence – the ultimate loss.” Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 260.

⁵⁵ Fee makes a similar division, stating that “The issue is presented in our verses 1-2; it has to do with the day of the Lord.” Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 270.

⁵⁶ S.E. Porter, J.T. Reed, and M.B. O’Donnell, *Fundamentals of New Testament Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010), 315.

⁵⁷ Bruce, *1&2 Thessalonians*, 165.

the day of the Lord had already come. Yet this position appears founded on a view of the parousia which is indebted to the entire New Testament teaching on this topic, which describes the public and globally obvious nature of the coming of Jesus. The fact that at least some of the Thessalonians could entertain the possibility that the parousia had come without universal knowledge of the event, may reflect certain perspectives or limitations in Paul's teaching. The text sees the problem as being, that certain believers were being troubled by a form of teaching that stated the day of the Lord had indeed already arrived. Not, as some commentators maintain, that it was imminent, or that present sufferings revealed its nearness.⁵⁸ As Malherbe notes in slightly acerbic tones, "[s]uch a view is based less on lexicographical or grammatical grounds than on assumptions of what the Thessalonians could not have thought."⁵⁹ Thus, Paul exhorts his audience not to receive the teaching that day of the Lord had already transpired. To convince the Thessalonians of the futurity of that event, he lays out a set of apocalyptic phenomena that will precede the coming of the Lord.

iii. The Restrainer, and the Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3-12)

The opacity of this section of apocalyptic teaching has occasioned much scholarly debate, and even more overly confident popular interpretations of the implied chronological schema and the meaning of some of the obtuse descriptions employed. The fact that the description is so opaque may in fact be an important consideration in relation to the authenticity of the passage, reflecting a quickly formulated apostolic response that in many ways raises more questions than it answers.

This section opens with the description of the coming apostasy and the figure through which it is inaugurated. That figure is described variously in the passage as "the man of lawlessness," "the son of destruction" (v. 3), and later simply as "the lawless one" (v. 8). This character's purpose, according to the epistle, is simultaneously to oppose the correct recipient of worship, and to exalt himself to divine status by taking the seat of God in the temple. The antithetical role attributed to this figure, has led to some scholars labelling him as the "Antichrist,"⁶⁰ which equates this figure mentioned in 2 Thessalonians with the apocalyptic opponent described in the Johannine epistles (1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:13; 2 Jn 1:7). Such equivalence is best resisted, since it reads non-Pauline language into the description given in 2 Thess 2:3-12.

Paul takes a step further back in time with 2 Thess 2:5-7 to describe forces and figures that are part of the Thessalonians' contemporary present. The rhetorical question, "do you not remember...?" links both the preceding material and what follows. Bruce notes,

Since they had received this instruction by word of mouth, a general allusion was sufficient to remind them of the details. What had to be made clear to them was that the

⁵⁸ For an early expression of this view which was influential on subsequent English language commentators see J.B. Lightfoot, "The Churches of Macedonia", in *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 251-269.

⁵⁹ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 417.

⁶⁰ Charles is representative of this tendency. He labels his discussion of 2 Thess 2.3-12 as "the Apostasy and the Antichrist", and goes on to comment that "as the revelation of God culminated in Christ, so the manifestation of evil will culminate in Antichrist, whose parusia (2 Thess. ii. 9) is the Satanic counterfeit of the true Messiah." Charles, *Eschatology: Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, 439. While the interpretation may be correct, it is misleading to apply Johannine terminology to this figure, who is described in differing ways from the Johannine figure.

rebellion would precede (and be brought to an end by) the Parousia of Jesus on the Day of the Lord.⁶¹

The act of recall that is demanded involves both teaching on the future aspect of the coming of Jesus, and details of the arrival of the “man of lawlessness” prior to the parousia. Here Paul is claiming consistency between his former oral presentation of eschatological teaching and the views that he is now espousing in writing. The problematic nature of 2 Thess 2:6-7 has long been recognized. Bruce describes it gently as “a most prosaic passage,”⁶² Malherbe states that “[t]here is nothing like 2 Thess 2:1-12 anywhere else in Paul’s writings or in the NT,”⁶³ and specifically in relation to 2:6-7 Wanamaker writes “[t]hese two verses are among the most problematic texts in the whole Pauline corpus.”⁶⁴ Despite these obscurities, some commentators have claimed that the problem is not to be found in the text, but resides with modern readers unaware of Paul’s fuller oral teaching. From this perspective Fee is of the opinion that,

Here in particular those of us who read this letter at a much later time, and without their inside knowledge of “these things” that Paul “used to tell” them, are generally left with more questions than answers. One can understand the argument as such easily enough; our problems lie with some of the details, to which the Thessalonians had access but we do not.⁶⁵

However, it is not entirely certain what the Thessalonians would have made of Paul’s apocalyptic teaching, being infused, as it was, with so many elements that were drawn from a Jewish cosmological outlook. It can no longer be determined whether all the details had been communicated to Paul’s audience previously, or if some of the specific information was newly formulated specifically in order to support Paul’s larger argument that there were indeed other events that must take place prior to the parousia.

Without doubt one of the most intractable exegetical problems has to do with understanding the referents denoted by Paul’s τὸ κατέχον/ὁ κατέχων language. There is no attempt to resolve this problem here, or to account for the somewhat baffling shift from the impersonal neuter form (2 Thess 2:6), to the substantivized personalized masculine participle (2 Thess 2:7). Rather, the major suggestions are listed in order to see how they fit into the eschatological scheme that Paul offers. Nicholl provides seven major possibilities, six suggestions listed together which are dismissed, and then followed by his own seventh proposal (which turns out to be the solution that he finds compelling!). Listing pairings (where appropriate) for the masculine participle and the neuter impersonal noun produces the following possibilities:

- 1a. the Roman emperor/empire
- 1b. a particular human ruler/the principle of law and order
2. Paul/the proclamation of the Gospel
3. Satan/rebellion
4. God/God’s will and/or plan
5. the Holy Spirit
6. Michael the archangel/Michael’s restraining activity.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 169.

⁶² Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 163.

⁶³ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 427.

⁶⁴ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 249.

⁶⁵ Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, 284.

⁶⁶ C.R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, SNTSMS 126 (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 228, 230, 246-248.

The first two options (either 1a or 1b, and option 2) have commanded the greatest levels of support. However, neither of these views is unproblematic. If the τὸ κατέχον refers to the Roman Empire, then Paul imparts an extremely significant and positive apocalyptic role to an earthly power that is not aligned with the gospel. As Wanamaker states the issues, “it is difficult to believe that Paul looked to the collapse of Roman rule as a precondition for the final denouement of the present age. Notwithstanding Rom. 13:1-7, Paul was no exponent of civil religion (that is, religion used to legitimate the rule of the state), as this view would suggest.”⁶⁷ This problem becomes more acute when one recalls that in 1 Cor 2:8, Paul accuses the rulers of this age of being complicit in the death of Jesus.⁶⁸ Given Paul’s unembarrassed assessment of himself in the divine soteriological scheme, it may be felt that that viewing the restrainer as the Apostle to the Gentiles and the restraint as the gospel which he proclaims is a far more promising interpretation. Such an understanding falls foul of the tension that it would create in Paul’s own eschatological expectation that he would be alive at the parousia (1 Thess 4:17). Given that he acknowledges that the restrainer will be removed before the man of lawlessness arises, and that the epiphany of that figure precedes the parousia, the view that Paul sees himself as the restrainer creates a serious, or at the very least an unresolved tension between these two views.⁶⁹ Even greater problems attend the other views.

However, while interpretation of certain specific details remains intractable, the pastoral purpose and the broad theological agenda in 2 Thess 2:13 remains patently clear. Paul describes the events that must unfold prior to the parousia, to convince the Thessalonians that claims that the day of the Lord has come cannot be true. Malherbe describes the tone of the passage in the following manner, “this section is not dogmatic in character but is intended to calm the congregation and provide it security.”⁷⁰ Here Paul shows his credentials as a pastoral figure, rather than displaying a primary concern to produce a complete theological statement of eschatological events.⁷¹ It would be wrong to overplay the distinction between pastoral and theological concerns. While Paul’s motivation for this discussion may originate in the community unrest at Thessalonica, his consoling response is theocentric, and strives to assure the recent believers that the period of lawlessness is part of God’s plan to both expose and delude those who hold to false beliefs. Paul attempts to calm his audience even in regard to his disclosure that man of lawlessness will bring the “deception of wickedness” (2 Thess 2:10), by declaring the coming judgment upon those who accept the deception of the man of lawlessness. Paul’s response to the Thessalonians, who have been captivated by the view that the day of the Lord has transpired, is to instruct them that the ones who should actually be most susceptible to false teaching are those who have not received the gospel. While the remainder of the epistle may seek to address the social unrest in the community that incorrect

⁶⁷ Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 250.

⁶⁸ In favour of understanding “the rulers of this age” as earthly political and social structures, see A.C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGNTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 233-239; for alternative positions that view demonic powers as the referent see A.W. Carr, *Angels and Principalities*, SNTSMS 42 (Cambridge: CUP, 1981), 118-120; and W. Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁶⁹ Also, as Nicholl states, “it is unclear why Paul would have referred to himself and his death in such a cryptic way and why his death would result in the revelation of the rebel.” Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 229.

⁷⁰ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 427-428.

⁷¹ The same pastoral attitude generated the theologically informed response to concerns over believers who had died (1 Thess 4:13-18) and the formulation of a theology of suffering in (2 Thess 1:5-10).

eschatological fervour has generated, at this point Paul's direct teaching about the parousia ceases.

PAUL – THE APOCALYPTICALLY MINDED PASTOR

Many recent studies on what are often considered the “weightier,” or more theological of the Pauline letters have wrestled with determining whether Paul should be understood as a responsive situationally informed thinker, or as a more coherent and systematic thinker. The answer to that question can only be inferred from the data contained in his writings. For many, it is the latter description that best depicts Paul, and while he may not be viewed as a systematic theologian in any modern sense, he is seen as displaying a coherent and consistent set of beliefs with fixed core understandings representing the central aspects of what he taught to his fledgling communities. Although the debate is to some extent more about degrees of coherence, since it is apparent that Paul is neither totally chaotic in his thinking nor has he produced writings that cohere with ultimate logical precision,⁷² there is nonetheless meaningful disagreement concerning whether Paul's theology was reactive and formulated in response to community crises and needs, or whether it was preformed and deployed in response to such situations as the need arose. Much of this scholarly discussion has revolved around Paul's epistle to the Romans in particular, with implications being derived for the corpus of genuine Pauline writings. Thus, as one side of that debate, specifically in relation to Romans, Manson states that the letter should be seen as “the summing up of the positions reached by Paul and his friends at the end of the long controversy whose beginnings appear in 1 Corinthians,” thus the letter is “a manifesto setting forth his deepest convictions on central issues.”⁷³ By contrast, Dunn sees the coherence as not being situationally based but stemming from prior theological convictions. He states, “the exposition transcends the immediacy of its several purposes and provides a coherent and integrated vision of the eschatological people of God (Gentile *and* Jew) which is of lasting value.”⁷⁴ Even more forcefully, Doug Campbell claims that the burden of proof lies with those who would question whether Paul's thinking exhibits meaningful coherence.

Is a rigorous account of a theoretical dimension within the interpretation of Paul even appropriate if he was not in fact an especially systematic thinker – or, as pastor and missionary, perhaps not even attempting to write systematically? Indeed, are realities, both in Paul and in church history, rather more untidy than this proposal's highly rigorous account allows, to the point that it can be safely ignored?

I suggest, however, that this is not an especially coherent claim to make *in advance* of an analysis. Most importantly, it is incorrect to exclude a given thinker from the quality of rigor *before* any attempt has been made to prove or disprove the claim. Paul must be given the benefit of the doubt. He might of course ultimately prove to be lacking in rigor – but he might not. Hence to insist on an absence of rigor as a prior methodological principle seems deeply self-contradictory.⁷⁵

⁷² For a discussion of the false dichotomy drawn between his own position and that of E.P. Sanders, see H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, WUNT 29 (2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987). He writes, “Critics often detect a difference between Sanders’ position and mine: while Sanders acknowledges that Paul was, in the last analysis, coherent, I tend to render him “completely incoherent” (thus Watson, *Paul* 18). This, I think is an oversimplification. Of course I, too, am of the opinion that *some* things never changed in Paul's mind.” Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, xxiii, n. 46.

⁷³ T.W. Manson, “St Paul's Letter to the Romans – and Others”, in M. Black (ed.), *Gospels and Epistles* (Manchester: MUP, 1962), 241.

⁷⁴ J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38A (Waco: Word, 1988), lxii.

⁷⁵ D.A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 13.

The burden of proof probably better lies with the one making the case either for consistency or incoherence, rather than always falling on those who see Paul as not being systematic in his thinking. It is interesting to note that Campbell switches between “coherence” and “rigor,” as though these were interchangeable. In many ways Dunn better understands what is at stake when he sees that the debate revolves around whether Paul’s thinking transcends situational concerns, or if it rather is reactive to ecclesiological and pastoral situations. While the Thessalonian correspondence has not figured to any large degree in this debate, it perhaps can make a significant contribution.

Without doubt, Paul exercises a foundational pedagogical position in relation to the believers in Thessalonica. His original role as the one who taught them the gospel with its apocalyptic vision continues in the letters he writes to the community. As the founding figure for the Thessalonian community, Paul undoubtedly retained a status as an authoritative source of teaching. However, it would appear that Paul’s instruction is based on generating assent among his converts to a set of key convictions, but, as certain issues which are discussed in the epistle demonstrate, he needed to fill gaps, probably not just for the Thessalonians but quite likely also for himself. In terms of eschatology, Paul’s key convictions appear to be twofold. These are that believers are awaiting the day of the Lord, and at the parousia those who accept the gospel will be with the Lord. Obviously Paul had provided more instruction on eschatological matters than these two core affirmations, as is suggested in his comments that with regard to “times and seasons” he does not need to write to the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:1) and regarding the day of the Lord, the Thessalonians should simply recollect previous teaching (2 Thess 2:5). However, despite claims that the passage implies otherwise, Paul appears not to have previously provided instruction concerning the fate of believers who die before the parousia.⁷⁶ This should not be seen as a deficiency in Paul’s instruction, but rather may show that interpreters have been operating with the wrong model concerning Paul’s pedagogical practices. It appears that Paul’s theological convictions come about in two ways. First there is the set of prior convictions, which are the central affirmations of his understanding of the gospel. Second, there are answers that Paul provides in response to the questions, needs, or situations that arise in his newly established communities. In this way Paul’s letters are best understood as dynamic formulations of Christian theology, and perhaps the Thessalonian correspondence most fully aligns with such a description.

Such an understanding of Paul’s pedagogical approach has been shown to align with wider practices and draws upon insights from rhetorical criticism. Thus, Mitchell notes the cautions in ancient exegesis against prematurely systematizing data. She states,

All early Christian exegesis is strategic and adaptable, and all the elite authors knew what commonplaces to appeal to for readings that aligned either side of the rhetorically constructed divide between readings that appealed “to the letter” and those that appealed “to the spirit.” The goal of ancient biblical interpretation was utility to the purpose at hand, however contextually defined. And this began with Paul.⁷⁷

This appears to reflect the way Paul instructs the Thessalonians concerning eschatological matters. The community has been taught that its identity is fundamentally linked to the parousia. As Luckensmeyer observes in his conclusion, “[t]he new community identity is characterized by waiting.”⁷⁸ Although Paul

⁷⁶ So Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 166.

⁷⁷ Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, x.

⁷⁸ Luckensmeyer, *The Eschatology of First Thessalonians*, 320.

reaffirms this central conviction (1 Thess 1:10), he also clarifies what he sees as the key social and ethical implications that must attend the community during this period of expectant waiting.

Clarification is not the only way Paul modifies his previous teaching concerning the parousia. With the response to the issue of believers who have died, Paul is forced to supplement previous teaching by combining a possibility that had not been considered within the framework of his core eschatological convictions.⁷⁹ The central proposition that governs the response is the prior belief that God's resurrection of Jesus is an act of vindication. For Paul this demonstrates that God will also vindicate deceased believers by raising them also. By this, as Richard succinctly observes, Paul provides a "kerygmatic basis for eschatological belief."⁸⁰

A third method Paul adopts to modify his eschatological teaching appears to be correcting previous statements, or at least correcting what he characterizes as incorrect interpretation of his teaching. He refutes the implication that some in Thessalonica have drawn, namely that the day of the Lord has come. Richard sees that the problem of an over-realized eschatology arising "from a variety of sources within the community, whether from spirit-inspired utterances of visionaries, the more extensive preaching or interpretations of apocalyptic preachers, or even a supporting apocalyptic document alleged to be from Paul (2:2)."⁸¹ While Paul refutes this line of interpretation, the fact that some of his recent converts understood his message in this sense suggests that ultimately it was his oral proclamation concerning the imminence of the parousia, which generated an apocalyptic fervour in the community that Paul recognized later as having dire theological and sociological consequences. In response, Paul tones down earlier emphases, both by stressing the parousia had not happened, and by calling for the re-establishment of normal social order among Thessalonian believers.

Regardless of the outcome of the debate concerning whether Paul had a fully formed theology which he articulated in the letter to the Romans, if that question were to be asked in regard to his earlier writings such the Thessalonian correspondence, then the situational and responsive nature of his theology would have to be acknowledged. Paul relates to members of the Thessalonian community as a pastor and missionary teacher. This does not mean that his instruction lacks theological underpinnings. It does, however, suggest that he draws upon those theological resources at his disposal to develop responses to situations he had not previously considered. He also reformulates previous expressions of belief that were producing negative results, often by clarifying previous teaching in an expanded form. As Paul's earliest writings, the Thessalonian letters provide a fascinating window on his thinking at an early stage in its development. Certain core beliefs can already be seen, such as the conviction that God raised Jesus. However, in relation to eschatological teaching even within these two letters one can detect movement from Paul's oral proclamation of the parousia, to affirmations concerning the necessity to wait for God's son (1 Thess 1:10), to the assurance that the day of the Lord has not occurred (2 Thess 2:2).⁸² These are subtle, but significant shifts in perspective, which attest that

⁷⁹ Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 260-261.

⁸⁰ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 235.

⁸¹ Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians*, 343.

⁸² There is no implied criticism of Charles' four stage eschatological scheme. As Charles acknowledged that division mapped out broad stages in the apostle's thinking for heuristic purposes, and it did not represent every developmental stage in Paul's reflection on eschatology. See Charles, *Eschatology: Hebrew, Jewish and Christian*, 437.

Paul was a thinker who was capable of development and maturation in his theology, and he adapted his theological formulations to address the pressing pastoral situations of his communities. Pauline theology should not be viewed as an inflexible procrustean bed of immutable ideas, but a creative, reflexive, and responsive process whereby new situations, pastoral needs and spiritual insights allowed for the development of more robust theological expressions. In this way the apocalyptically minded pastor became the ecclesially adaptable theologian, not only for the communities he established, but also for the wider early Christian movement.